

Heart of Asia

Compassion in Action

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Supporting Vulnerable communities in Tibet Activity report & 2024 projects



Nomad woman milking, Sershul area, Kham.

NOMAD RETURNERS 2024



Tibet's **Drokpa**, or **nomads**, are the heart and soul of Tibetan culture and until recently they comprised an estimated 25% to 40% of the Tibetan population.

Drokpa means “people of the solitudes”, and they are truly a mountain people, herding livestock on high altitude pastures for millennia. (The average altitude in Tibet is 14,000 feet.) The nomad way of life has remained unchanged for centuries, until recently, and their traditional ecological knowledge and understanding makes them natural stewards of Tibet's grasslands. They are living examples of original Tibetan culture.

In recent years a **government resettlement policy**, plus global warming and the pressure to respond to a market economy, have threatened their ancient, self-sufficient and holistic way of life. Some nomads have chosen to settle, in order to be near to schools and medical facilities.

However, many regret the change to a settled life where they are not allowed to keep their herd of yak and dri, are given no re-training, and so have no marketable skills or focus for their lives. They miss the peace, the animals, and the freedom and self-sufficiency of their traditional way of life. Consequently, in many cases poverty and crime are the outcome of “resettlement.” Thankfully the resettlement policy has recently been abandoned and the value of nomad life is being reassessed by the authorities. However, most settled nomads who wish to return to their former way of life do not have the funds to buy the animals to start again, and are given no support to return by local government.

“My nomad family live at very high altitude...there are lots of beautiful flowers and plentiful grass and medicinal plants grow abundantly there. So the Yak always have enough to eat...We knew that if we moved to town we'd have to buy meat and dairy products and we wouldn't have anything to sell. If you don't have your Yak you have nothing. We knew that the best thing was to stay as nomads as we have plenty of what we need, and because it is so high-altitude it is very good for dairy production with the Yak.”

Ani Tenzin Yangchen



Nomads churning butter, Sershul area



Nomad family drying cheese, Sershul area

Project beneficiaries in 2024



Dawa and Jimpa make sure that the selected dri feed their calves before the journey to a new nomad returner family.

Heart of Asia is now in the **ninth year** of its project to support nomads to return to, or remain in nomad life. Thanks to the generosity of our donors this year **Heart of Asia** was again able to fund 40 Dri (female Yak), each pregnant or with a calf. These will support 4 small mainly young families. As in previous years we partnered with a respected local community leader, who advised us as to the 4 families we could help.

So far **Heart of Asia** has helped **34 drokpa** families return to nomad life.

Every year Dawa, our amazing project manager (the only salaried member of the **Heart of Asia** team), goes to Dathangpa nomadic area to purchase Dri. He is assisted by his friend Jimpa who has a wonderful eye for the healthiest and strongest animals.



Our partner, **Abbot Beima Norbu**, is a respected community leader in Sershul area in Kham (eastern Tibet.) He advised us as to the four families who would most benefit from our support. He comes from a nomad family and is keen to support the declining nomad community.

Dawa purchases “**life release**” Dri for our project, as they are cheaper. Life release (or tsethar) means that an animal will be allowed to live out its life span and die of natural causes. People often practice this, for example, in the name of a relative who is sick and needs blessings, and a Lama puts a ribbon in the animal's ear to mark it out.

In 2024 **Heart of Asia** helped 4 families. They came from **Sershul and Song grasslands** area where there was formerly a huge resettlement drive by the Chinese authorities resulting, sadly, in on-going poverty and crime. Our beneficiaries were **Lobdro and Nelor, Songsong and Yudron, Balen and Bumalha, and Dakyi**. All had deeply regretted choosing to settle and their only option to return to nomad life was to help look after the animals of other nomads who needed help with larger herds. Sadly they could not earn enough to live, even by collecting Caterpillar Fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis* – a herbal medicine) and Droma (*Potentilla anserina* – a highly nutritious Tibetan delicacy) to supplement their income.



25 year old Lobdro and his 20 year old wife Nelor have a 2 year old child. They are poor as they were working for other nomad families and local monasteries, looking after Yak and Dri in the summer time. In winter they were living with relatives in a resettlement village. They really wanted to live independently as nomads with their own animals so Heart of Asia gave them 10 dri, each with a baby.



35 year old Songsong and his wife 30 year old Yudron have 2 daughters aged 12 and 10. They were nomads but a few years ago they sold their animals and moved into a resettlement village. They were unable to earn enough money to live. (Unfortunately the local authorities do not give settled nomads any training in new and relevant skills.) In 2023 and 2024 they looked after other nomads animals but as with the previous family it was not enough income to live on.

Heart of Asia helped them with 10 dri, each with a baby so that they could lead an independent and sustainable nomad life.



30 year old Balen and his 30 year old wife Bumlha, have 2 children. Their background is the same as the previous family – they gave up nomad life and faced problems in the resettlement village. They really wanted to live independently as nomads again.



59 year old Dakyi has two sons living with her, **Dartse 21** and a younger son who is about 18. (Bumlha, in the family above, is her daughter.) The family situation is exactly the same as **Balen** and **Bumlha**. The two families decided together to give up nomad life and both families faced the same problems. Both families decided to return to the grasslands and work for other nomad families.

It costs around £480 to purchase a Dri, including transport and facilitator costs. If they need it we also supply each family with a canvas tent, which costs around £336.

Donations to *Heart of Asia* ensure not only the well-being of these families, but also the preservation of this traditional way of living with its Indigenous Wisdom. The grazing and movement of **Yak** and **Dri** has been proven to have enormous positive environmental impact on the high-altitude grasslands in Tibet, which ultimately benefits us all.

“High up in the Tibetan Plateau nomads have moved their herds from summer pasture to winter pasture rotationally to avoid both overgrazing and grazing exclusion, sustainably managing rangelands for thousands of years. This practice renewed grasslands, improved wildlife habitat and diversity, and protected the headwaters of Asia's 10 major rivers. They have also maintained a healthy environment and secured local economic stability; the rich natural resources enabled self-sufficiency. Over the past three decades, however, changes in the region — including altered land use practices — have threatened the stability of these ecosystems. It seems that policy makers disregarded the wisdom of the nomads' thousands-year-old practices.”

Thupten Wodzer in Yale Environment Review

To help us support more Nomad returners please visit www.heartofasia.org to make a donation via PayPal, or see our leaflet for other options.



A nomad "resettlement" village near the Song grasslands.

Images of Nomad Life



Traditional clay stove



Metal stove



Milking time



A rukor of black tents in the Song grasslands

THE YUSHU ORPHANS



Heart of Asia's biggest commitment has been to **Wangdrak Rinpoche's Yushu Orphans**, who lost their families in the devastating **2010 Yushu Earthquake**. Until now we have provided 76% of the funds that are needed to sustain the children until they graduate from school.

(Young people stay in school and college longer in China. Funders in Australia pay fees and support living expenses for the students while they are away at college and University. The young people return to the home during the holidays.)

Our contribution covers the annual cost of food, clothes, house rent, electricity, a cook and helper's salary, school requirements and simple medical expenses.



Losar (Tibetan New Year) at the home, with main carer Awang

The largest parental presence in the children's lives are **Awang** and her husband **Choeden**, who foster each child with care and attention to their many school, medical and personal needs. *Heart of Asia's* Project Manager and father of two **Dawa**, their "Uncle", visits the children regularly and liaises with us about the orphans' financial needs. Besides this local family, the children know they are supported by caring people around the world.

Awang, Choeden, Dawa and **Diane** decided in 2023 that the annual picnic should take place in August when all the children would be back in **Yushu** from schools and colleges and could enjoy the picnic together, as a family. The youngsters had a wonderful time - Tibetans really love picnics!



Awang with some of the children

Photos from the Annual picnic 2024



"A few of our original children moved in with extended family over the years, so we presently have 18 children living in the Yushu home or boarding at schools. A few of them have graduated college, but the job market in China is highly competitive for young people and they so far haven't found professional work. As a solution, Dawa guided them to renovate and run a photocopying shop in one of the rooms they no longer use in the Yushu home - which is in the middle of a school district with plenty of schoolchildren passing by. Along with photocopies the shop sells stationary and snacks, so it's been a success so far with lots of traffic! The graduates are managing the shop as their transitional jobs."

"Our youngest children still studying locally in middle school live full-time in our Yushu home, while the older children still boarding at colleges return for 4 months of vacation each year. So the Yushu home serves as home-base for all our children at their various stages in life. They are all keeping healthy and on track to complete some form of higher education by 2030. Their success is due to the loving care of their local foster elders, Awang, Chuden, Dolma and Dawa - and, essentially, to your ongoing compassionate support."

Gebchak Gonpa

See also: YUSHU CHILDREN THEN AND NOW
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gebchak/albums/Yushuchildrenupdate>

VOICES4FREEDOM

In December we sent **\$2,500 (£1,981.92)** to **VOICES4FREEDOM** on Giving Tuesday, when funds are matched 100%. So they received **\$5,000 (£3,963.84)**.

VOICES4FREEDOM works with modern slavery in India. It is an American non profit organisation founded by Peggy Callahan, Human Rights Activist and film maker, and friends.



An enslaved woman working at a brick kiln



Children at a School4Freedom

"It is hard to believe, but slavery today is at epidemic proportions, despite being illegal in every country. These are real slaves by the harshest definitions: people forced to work under threat of violence, without pay, and unable to escape. They are trapped in brothels, factories, mines, farm fields, and restaurants. More than half are women and children. Despite real progress, slavery often remains hidden and on the margins of public concern."

Slavery doesn't look much different today than it has throughout history. In northern India, entire villages are enslaved—men, women, and children are literally controlled by another human being and held against their will, generation after generation. They are caught in a cycle of debt bondage slavery, and it's because they are not educated."

<https://www.voices4freedom.org/>

"Your generous "Giving Tuesday" donation to Voices 4 Freedom is supporting our Schools 4 Freedom. At these schools in Northern India, children are taught the 3 Rs and everyone learns how to use the legal system to fight their slave owners and free themselves forever. No more children will be born into slavery in these villages. And freed villagers then join other freed villages to spread the lessons they've learned to help bring more communities to freedom. Your donation helps begin a beautiful cycle of freedom."

Gwendolyn Oliver **Voices 4 Freedom**.

OUR THANKS

A big thank you to our Project Manager **Dawa**, who keeps an eye on the needs of the Yushu Orphans, and works hard running our Nomad Return Project. Congratulations to him and his wife **Lhaden** who had a new baby girl in May this year, joining sister **Chuden** (18) and brother **Kalsang** (16.) Her name is **Yu Druk Tso**—meaning Turquoise Dragon Lake.



Dawa, Kalsang, Lhaden and Yu Druk Tso



Yu Druk Tso



Abbot Beima Norbu

A big thank you also to our partners in the Nomad Return Project, Community leaders **Yamatsering Rinpoche** and **Abbot Beima Norbu**. They come from nomad families themselves and fully appreciate the value of drokpa life – both for the families and for the land.

As always the **Heart of Asia** team (**Di, Les, Gitti, Claire** and **Valerie**) would like to express our gratitude to all our generous supporters and helpers, who make our work possible. In particular a million thanks to our amazing donors from the Golden Sufi Center – www.goldensufi.org

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